



Southern Writers Series

No. 2

ROBERT
PENN
WARREN

BY JOHN L. LONGLEY, JR.

Steck-Vaughn Company • Austin, Texas

Southern Writers Series

No. 2

General Editors:

*Sam H. Henderson, James W. Lee
North Texas State University*

Advisory Editors:

*Eugene Current-Garcia, Auburn University
Louis D. Rubin, Jr., University of North Carolina
Lewis P. Simpson, Louisiana State University*

ROBERT PENN WARREN

BY JOHN LEWIS LONGLEY, JR.
University of Virginia

Steck-Vaughn Company • Austin, Texas

John Lewis Longley, Jr., took his A.B. and M.A. degrees at the University of Tennessee and his Ph.D. degree at New York University. He is currently Professor of Humanities in the School of Engineering and Applied Science of the University of Virginia. He is the author of *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes and Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*. His short fiction and essays on modern literature have appeared in such journals as *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Georgia Review*, and *Southern Review*. He has been Visiting Professor at several other universities, and was in 1961-1962 Fulbright Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Freiburg.

ROBERT PENN WARREN

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 79-78488
Copyright © 1969 by Steck-Vaughn Company, Austin, Texas
All Rights Reserved. Printed and Bound in the United States of America

ROBERT PENN WARREN

ROBERT PENN WARREN was born in Guthrie, Kentucky, in 1905 and lived there until he moved to Clarksville, Tennessee, where he attended the local high school. He entered Vanderbilt University at the age of sixteen. While still an undergraduate, he assisted in editing *The Fugitive*, a "little magazine" that had been organized by a group in Nashville which included John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate, all at that time younger members of the Vanderbilt faculty. These men and their associates were later to be known as the "Fugitives," and although most of them were to modify their individual viewpoints on literary theory and practice, the cohesion among them was to be lasting. In 1925 Warren was graduated *summa cum laude*. After a stint as a teaching fellow at Berkeley and at Yale, he went to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, receiving the B.Litt. degree in 1930. His first book was published in 1929, a biography entitled *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*. Back in the United States, he held various teaching posts until he went to Louisiana State University in 1934. One year later, *Thirty-Six Poems* was published and very favorably received. The literary career of Robert Penn Warren had begun.

Attempts to rank creative artists in terms of relative importance are usually irrelevant. Nevertheless, it may be said that in the last third of the century we live in, Robert Penn Warren occupies a position both outstanding and unique. His position is unique in that he is the only living American author who is unquestionably of the first rank in poetry and literary criticism and the novel. He has also written valuable nonfiction on the race issue. *The Legacy*

of the Civil War establishes him not only as a historian but also as a philosopher of history. His book-length poem *Brother to Dragons* is a play for voices, a vivid imaginative commentary on the mind of Thomas Jefferson as Jefferson reflects on the meaning of his own life and deeds. Warren is the only writer who has received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry as well as for the novel.

Warren has a keen eye for the details of American life and a flawless ear for the nuances of American speech. He renders person and place with a realism that is truly moving. But all this, fascinating as it may be, is surface. More important is significance. In his justly famous essay on Joseph Conrad, Warren states that the philosophical novelist is one "for whom the urgency of experience, no matter how vividly and strongly experience may enchant, is the urgency to know the meaning of experience." In his Foreword to *Brother to Dragons*, he states that "if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake." In his own creative work, this striving to learn the meaning of experience often emerges as conflict—conflict not only between persons or ideas or movements but also between Warren the sophisticated literary critic and historian of ideas and Warren the Southerner who grew up on spread-eagle rhetoric and a haunted historical consciousness of his regional background.

For Warren has been, and is, a Southerner. He is, however, a kind of Southerner we have grown accustomed to since the twenties and thirties—one whose origin and early life rooted him deeply in the South, but also one who was able to travel and study in different cultures in his young maturity, and, in the rubbing of his old assumptions against new surroundings, bring his own awareness into sharper focus. With very minor exceptions, the setting of all Warren's work is the South. But, as he constantly insists, his work is not merely Southern, nor is it merely "historical," even in those works set in earlier times; he simply adopts whatever means are available to dramatize the particular myth he is using. His novel *World Enough and Time* contains a running authorial commen-

tary that is contemporary in mood and idiom. *Brother to Dragons* owes much of its power to Thomas Jefferson's awareness of the history that has happened since his own time and Jefferson's comment on that history. Thus, "content" in Warren's work is always a re-creation of some urgent, compelling, timeless reality. The ambiguities, polarities, and tensions of human existence are given shape and form. The conflict between brute fact and abstract idealism is given universal expression, whatever the historical frame of reference.

John Brown: The Making of a Martyr (1929), Warren's first published book, shows his lifelong concern with history already at work. To repeat, history for Warren can never be simply "the record of what happened." There is always the urgency to know the meaning of what happened. The story of John Brown is the story of a man endowed by history with a significance he himself did not fully understand. Warren's research for this biography was extensive, and he found much primary material, but the letters, diaries, and public statements of Brown ultimately contradict one another. The reader who is interested in a final, exhaustive evaluation of John Brown—his career and his motives—may have to look elsewhere. In the forty years since Warren's book appeared, much new material has been written about Brown and the times he helped shape. However, for the reader who is interested in the work of Robert Penn Warren, the book is fascinating. Whatever John Brown may have been in real life (and we may never find out) is not so important as what he became in American mythology. To the Union soldiers singing "John Brown's Body" he was a saint and martyr; to the South he was a mad fanatic who plotted the murder of thousands of women and children. All this aside, what is noteworthy in Warren's portrait is that Brown is so clearly a prototype of modern fiction: the abstract idealist, often good and noble, sometimes not, who pursues a visionary goal until he destroys himself and frequently those around him.

Warren has often quoted the observation made by Adam Gu-

rowski in 1857, to the effect that while other nations are accidents of geography or race, America is unique in being based on an idea. (An idea, Warren adds, put on paper in one night by one man.) Coonskin caps and TV cowboys aside, this idea has been the basis of the American dream and has helped produce the high degree of abstract idealism in American political history. Because of this idealism, our political history is rife with individuals who are remembered, for better or worse, because of their obsession with some one program or panacea. These persons may be as gentle as John Woolman or John Wesley or as murderous as Brown or John Wilkes Booth. The fixation in a given case may be no more than a bland conviction of moral superiority based on geography, or may extend to the sort of action so recently urged by George Lincoln Rockwell, for example.

The fanatic has been aptly defined as one who doubles his effort after losing sight of his aim. At times a protagonist in the Warren canon will ally himself with a public cause, as does Tobias Sears in *Band of Angels*, who is an Emersonian and Abolitionist. More often, as with other Warren characters like Jerry Beaumont, Amantha Starr, and Adam Rosenzweig, the obsession is personal: a diversionary action carried out in the effort to avoid self-knowledge. A single-minded program for reforming the world or fanatical obsession with the self cannot survive without the process of abstraction. Individual humans must be sacrificed to the higher ideal; day-to-day responsibilities are ignored. As with Creon or Macbeth or Ahab, the end result is usually the blood of others. If defeated in time, the protagonist may lapse into an apathetic emptiness. Only a few, like Jack Burden in *All the King's Men*, are able through great agony of spirit to achieve an acceptance of that complexity which is the world.

Warren's first novel, *Night Rider*, was not published until 1939, long after he had been recognized as a poet, short-story writer, critic, and teacher. The general subject of *Night Rider* is the Kentucky tobacco war which began in 1905, the year Warren was born.

An introductory note warns that the novel must be read neither as an allegory of Southern economic history nor, despite the climate of the time of publication, as an indictment of fascist terrorism.

The hero, Perse Munn, is not a historical figure; he is very much the archetypal modern man—unsure of himself, unsure of his genuine identity, unsure at times that the world itself is real. Like many characters who come later in Warren's work, he watches others around him, hoping to discover the secret of their Being. Among his acquaintances are Senator Tolliver, an orator and politician who is able to sway crowds, and Bill Christian, a tobacco farmer now passionately dedicated to organizing an association of tobacco growers to resist the coercive price-fixing of the Tobacco Trust. Urged on by these men and others, and characteristically unable to explain his own motives and feelings, Munn allows himself to be trapped into serving as attorney for the Association. Subsequently, he makes speeches and moves crowds, but he finds no lessening of the hollowness within him. He takes a murder case because he "feels" the man is innocent. (He will later find that the evidence which convicts another man has been planted.) Matters go from bad to worse. Night-riding tactics are begun, involving floggings, destruction of crops, terrorism, and eventually murder. Various factions take up the same tactics, some of them with old scores to settle, others with none at all.

This disintegration of the social fabric is matched by Munn's own inward, spiritual decay. His marriage goes to pieces, and his affair with Lucille Christian ends in emptiness. His home is burned by other night-riders. Seeking some redeeming gesture, Munn decides to kill Senator Tolliver, but is unable to believe in his own action. Wrongly accused of murdering a government witness, Munn hides out for a time at the cabin of Willie Proudfoot, a gentle and uncomplicated dirt farmer who had lived as a young trapper and trader in the Far West. Willie is a man who has ventured far and lived through much to return to the land of his fathers. But Perse Munn can read no lesson in Willie's life to mend his own.

When federal troops pursue him, Munn deliberately draws their fire and is killed.

After three decades, the critical analysis of *Night Rider* which is still viable is fairly well centered on fictional strategy and the structure of the novel—and, of course, on the meaning and significance of the various characters. Put another way, how has Warren managed to create Mr. Munn or failed to do so? Is the Willie Proudfoot story merely the first example of the notorious “inserted narratives”? (For inserted narratives, read irrelevant digression.)

Mr. Munn, a prototype for many characters in the subsequent novels, is a hollow man seeking to fulfill himself through violence. If we do not know him, it is because he does not know himself. The world around him is vivid enough, even though it is a world of darkness, and outrage is its keynote. Precisely for this reason, Mr. Munn and the world he wanders in cannot be a complete world, much less an ideal one. Various characters (Senator Tolliver, Mr. Christian, Dr. MacDonald, and Professor Ball) seem to live full and adequate lives, but almost all end in paralysis and defeat. Only Willie Proudfoot, illiterate and primitive, has lived through other versions of the same corrupting influences, only to emerge in a right relation to the world around him. Possibly the appearance of Proudfoot (and the function his story performs) is too long delayed, not sufficiently diffused throughout the novel. On the other hand, his purity is uncorrupted partly because he has held himself aloof from the passions and the corruptions that have destroyed the others.

The theme of human incompleteness seeking to fulfill itself in others and ending in violence is extended in Warren's next novel, *At Heaven's Gate* (1943). The complex plot is contrapuntal and elliptical. Most of the characters are satellites revolving around the corrupt and glittering business tycoon Bogan Murdock and, to a lesser extent, his daughter Sue. With a few exceptions, all the characters attempt to fulfill themselves by living in Bogan's shadow and attempting to become like him. What they do not realize is

that Bogan is more nearly empty than they and lives only through the exercise of domination over the emotions of others.

Like Oedipus, Macbeth, or Willic Stark (in *All the King's Men*), Bogan sets out to claw his way to the top, to achieve being in terms of pure power. Like Richard III, he begins by using the feelings of others as levers to achieve his ends; and, like Richard, he acquires a taste for the gratifications to be found in the domination of others. Landed and influential, Bogan manipulates politics, finance, and people. The symbol of this manipulation is his skillful horsemanship, and a discussion of horsemanship as a means of vicarious domination occurs on the first page of the book. Unfailing courteous, he is polite to everyone: his friends, Negroes, his seamier associates, and his family. His daughter Sue realizes that his politeness is “just a way of making people do things.”

Every human relationship is corrupted by Bogan to the furtherance of his manipulations. Even the land he donates to the state for a park to be named for his father is turned to advantage. He encourages the engagement of Sue to Jerry Calhoun to further his own ends. He destroys the honesty of Private Porsum, the mountaineer, by making him a bank president and using him to break a strike. As the book ends, government has been subverted; Porsum is dead; and Jerry Calhoun, who wanted Bogan as a father-substitute, is in jail as a scapegoat for Bogan's crimes. And Bogan, who is exploiting the death of the murdered Sue to gain “a million dollars' worth of free publicity,” cynically has himself photographed with the remaining members of his family in front of a large portrait of Andrew Jackson, while he piously calls on the people of the state to “have courage.”

Jerry Calhoun is the character most deeply seduced by Bogan. The fragmentation of his character increases only because this is what he wants most; he does not want to cure himself. By the various devices of time-shift, Jerry's plight is plotted in great detail. Like Sarrett and Sweetwater in the same book, he is struggling for self-definition, but in a barren direction. The son of a widowed

dirt farmer, he despises his crippled uncle and great-aunt and wants to remove himself as far as possible from their life. Working his way through the university, he plays football well enough to be named All-America. Offered the seduction of money and a business career, he succumbs quickly and totally. He remolds himself completely in Bogan's image, never realizing that Bogan is spiritually even poorer than himself. Jerry seeks complete noninvolvement in personal emotion. Feelings, particularly deep and openly experienced love, frighten and disgust him. Throughout their tortured relationship, Sue senses this incapacity in Jerry's rejection of the "cripples" in his family and elsewhere. At one point she tells him, "You'll die rich, Jerry. You've got what it takes. But . . . you're a cripple too. You're an emotional cripple."

Only at the end, in the shock of finding Sue murdered and himself in jail charged with crimes Bogan had assured him were never committed, does Jerry begin to fumble toward life again. Temporarily out on bail, brought home by his father, he lies in his bed in the old farmhouse, reviewing his life, fumbling and probing for the meaning of it all, striving blindly toward self-definition. His recovery will be a long process.

Sue is beautiful and rich. Men are attracted to her, and she in turn tries to define herself by her relation to four of them. They are her father, Jerry Calhoun, Slim Sarrett, and Sweetie Sweetwater. Without the ability to define the feeling, she senses the ultimate evil in her father and decides that she will not remain a pawn for him. Realizing that Jerry is a pale carbon copy of her father and nothing more, she rejects him also, but feels lost without him. Always intrigued by the self-sufficiency of Slim Sarrett, she turns to him because he seems to have the most to offer. But Slim as an aid to self-definition is less than complete. Sue drifts aimlessly in the circle of persons around Slim, taking for granted Slim's overestimate of himself. That haze is shattered by the arrival of Mr. Billie Constantidopeles. Within minutes it is demonstrated to Sue

that Slim, an old friend of Billie's, is homosexual and a cosmic liar about himself and his past. Sue leaves the apartment with Sweetie.

Time is running out for Sue. The doctrine of self-knowledge that Sweetwater preaches is little different from that of Slim. She finds that she is pregnant by Sweetwater. He wants the child but will not marry her. In an effort to force his hand, she has an abortion, thus symbolically rejecting her last human relationship. Alone and delirious after the operation, a series of images drifts through her mind, recreating with real poignance her childhood. At this moment Slim Sarrett returns and strangles her.

Slim Sarrett and Sweetie Sweetwater are both idealists (in the pattern of John Brown), and both are distorted and incomplete. Slim's student essay on tragedy defines a major tension of the book, but, then, even the devil can quote scripture. We meet him first in the holy poverty of scholarship. Like Sue's, our first impression of him is one of complete honesty, an absolute control of the self and the shaping of personal destiny. "One thing for certain," thinks Sue, "he never claimed to do anything he couldn't do." This impression deepens as Slim demonstrates his complete disregard for Bogan Murdock. Then the whole fantasy pops like a soap bubble. The perfected self of Slim Sarrett is perfect only because it was created by an act of will. Not content with the historical self he had, he invented one more to his own liking. So long as the world does not know that this self is synthetic, Slim's invented self exists in a many-sided perfection. When that perfection is exploded, Slim can respond only with violence; he murders Sue and takes her money.

Sweetwater denies the past also, but in ways which, if less phony, lead just as certainly to violence and fatality. The scion of a three-hundred-year-old tidewater family, he has rejected every association with his family and his past. He rids himself of his past, not by pretending it never existed, but by constantly alluding to it in order to repudiate it. He insists that he has earned the right to his new

freedom and self-definition. He has learned, as his father before him, that a man must believe in something beyond himself in order to believe in himself. He sees in Marxism the answer to every problem. He convinces himself that he cannot marry Sue when he has made her pregnant. Marriage, he decides, is a bourgeois trap that would get in the way of his program. "God, you're wonderful," Sue tells him, "you're just like my father." It is a terrible judgment, but a just one.

In an account as short as this, there is far too little space to do justice to all the major characters. However, at least one other character deserves special consideration—Ashby Wyndham, the God-struck mountaineer. His story forms the alternate half of the diptych arrangement of the chapters. By casting this half in the form of a dictated statement to the police, Warren is able to place it in the first person, giving it a kind of immediacy and force it would gain in no other way. If there is a single figure who achieves classic heroic stature in the novel, that figure is Ashby. His sin is pride, and his pride destroys, one by one, those he cares for: mother, brother, child, wife, friends, and disciples. In the beginning his pride leads him into blasphemy, greed, lust, and physical violence. After his religious conversion, his spiritual pride, which he cannot realize is pride, leads him into consequences even more disastrous. Read in isolation, the "Statement of Ashby Wyndham" has a power and sweep in its own right as great as anything else Warren has ever done. It counterpoints and restates all the themes of the novel: the struggle of the individual soul to reach a final understanding, to rid itself of the pus of impurity; the damaging and destroying of human beings in the pure pursuit of the ideal; the abandoning of nature for the paper symbols of usury; and violence against one's own family.

So far, this account of the moral content of *At Heaven's Gate* has been stated in almost purely negative terms. But the positive examples are there. Only two, perhaps, stand out: Mr. Calhoun (Jerry's father) and Duckfoot Blake. Mr. Calhoun does not have to think about self-definition because he has always had it and

has never had any reason to reshape his pattern. He is complete in his humaneness, and his bumbling awkwardness and provincialism only serve to define that humanity. Duckfoot represents the contemplative life as opposed to a life of overt moral action. He has achieved self-definition because he has already explored most of the avenues to it and out of his rich and varied experience has learned what to ignore. He is the comic hero of the novel, hiding his quixotic standards of courage and concern under a veneer of cynicism and world-weariness. He serves as chorus, commentator, definer, and yardstick of humanity. He adumbrates the character of Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* and the great lesson Jack had to learn: that the wish not to be involved, to remain forever beneath the surface of conscious life, is only another form of spiritual death.

At Heaven's Gate has been star-crossed in its critical history. It was first published in 1943, when most Americans had little time for anything except wiping out the Axis powers. Very few readers at that time could warm up to a novel set in the Roaring Twenties, and some reviewers were unkind enough to suggest that interest in such a subject was a sure indication of moral backwardness. (In point of fact, the action of the novel is 1928-1929, a mere fourteen years earlier than 1943; in terms of climate of opinion, it seems like centuries.) This lack of interest persisted for a few years after the war, and to some extent it parallels the much more drastic, if temporary, devaluation of the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald. A quarter of a century later, there is a different problem, but one also related to history and the shifting climate of opinion. Unavoidably, I suppose, this problem has to be labelled the "generation gap." In 1943 anyone old enough to read a novel had lived through part of the Roaring Twenties, and in the South, at least, he would have some familiarity with the kind of primitive, Holy-Roller religion and rhetoric that Ashby Wyndham speaks for. For the average intelligent undergraduate in 1969, this same background and experience is no longer guaranteed.

History aside, there are critical questions that are still valid. One